

OVER THE RIVER

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649666386

Over the River by John Galsworthy

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Cover @ 2017

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JOHN GALSWORTHY

OVER THE RIVER

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Published by William Heinemann Ltd.

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Issued by Duckworth & Co.

PLAYS: Eight Vols.

COMPLETE PLAYS: One Vol.

1782

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292196
16. 10 33

The Ryerson Press
Toronto

PR
6013
A5
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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN AT *The Windmill Press*
KINGSWOOD, SURREY

TO
Rudolf and Viola Sauter

OVER THE RIVER

CHAPTER I

CLARE, who for seventeen months had been the wife of Sir Gerald Corven of the Colonial Service, stood on the boat deck of an Orient liner in the River Thames, waiting for it to dock. It was ten o'clock of a mild day in October, but she wore a thick tweed coat, for the voyage had been hot. She looked pale—indeed, a little sallow—but her clear brown eyes were fixed eagerly on the land and her slightly touched-up lips were parted, so that her face had the vividness to which it was accustomed. She stood alone, until a voice said:

"Oh! *here* you are!" and a young man, appearing from behind a boat, stood beside her. Without turning, she said:

"Absolutely perfect day! It ought to be lovely at home."

"I thought you'd be staying in Town for a night at least; and we could have had a dinner and theatre. Won't you?"

"My dear young man, I shall be met."

"Perfectly damnable, things coming to an end!"

"Often more damnable, things beginning."

He gave her a long look, and said suddenly:

"Clare, you realise, of course, that I love you?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"But you don't love me?"

"Wholly without prejudice."

"I wish—I wish you could catch fire for a moment."

"I am a respectable married woman, Tony."

"Coming back to England because——"

"Of the climate of Ceylon."

He kicked at the rail. "Just as it's getting perfect. I've not said anything, but I know that your—that Corven——"

Clare lifted her eyebrows, and he was silent; then both looked at the shore, becoming momentarily more and more a consideration.

When two young people have been nearly three weeks together on board a ship, they do not know each other half so well as they think they do. In the abiding inanity of a life when everything has stopped except the engines, the water slipping along the ship's sides, and the curving of the sun in the sky, their daily chair-to-chair intimacy gathers a queer momentum and a sort of lazy warmth. They know that they are getting talked about, and do not care. After all, they cannot get off the ship, and there is nothing else to do. They dance together, and the sway of the ship, however slight, favours the closeness of their contacts. After ten days or so they settle down to a life together, more continuous than that of marriage, except that they still spend their nights apart. And then, all of a sudden, the ship stops, and they stop, and there is a feeling, at least on one side, perhaps on both, that stocktaking has been left till too late. A hurried vexed excitement, not unpleasurable, because suspended animation is at an end, invades their faculties; they are faced with the real equation of land animals who have been at sea.

Clare broke the silence.

"You've never told me why you're called Tony when your name is James."

"That *is* why. I *wish* you'd be serious, Clare; we haven't much time before the darned ship docks. I simply can't bear the thought of not seeing you every day."

Clare gave him a swift look, and withdrew her eyes to the shore again. 'How clean!' she was thinking. He had, indeed, a clean oval-shaped brown face, determined, but liable to good humour, with dark grey eyes inclined to narrow with his thoughts, and darkish hair; and he was thin and active.

He took hold of a button of her coat.